The Messenger Project: A classroom activity

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　教育的で興味や楽しさも見出せる, 心理的に圧迫感を受けない実際の英語使用場面の雰囲気の中で, 学生が英語力を伸ばすことができる環境を見出すことは難しい. インターネットは重要な情報源として, あるいは世界中との意思伝達手段としてますます重要な存在となってきている. コンピュータを使った教育もまた次第に広く容認され, 利用できるようになってきた. 従って, このような諸技術は, 学生たちの英語力を楽しく興味深い方法で促進するために利用できよう. 以上を念頭に, 私達は, 英語教育実践を促進する授業中のアクティビティーの一つとして, オンラインでのチャットの潜在的な利用可能性を探る試みをした.

In a traditional classroom, it is often difficult for teachers to create situations for students to practice their English using authentic language for real communication. While student-to-teacher conversation does take place, this is often restricted by the lesson plan for the day and time constraints. However, in many modern classrooms, with computers and other communication devices, a variety of trials have been carried out in order to provide students with the authentic language for real communication (e.g., Spreen, 2002). In particular, the integration of the Internet into the teaching and learning process is becoming a standard procedure in most academic formats (Nakayama, 2002), and other unique and interesting web-based instruction methods are increasingly being experimented with in English classrooms (e.g., Hsu, 2005; Pinkman, 2005). Online chatting, for instance, is one type of web-based instruction which is increasingly being used in the classroom by practicing language teachers (e.g., Bradley & Lomicka, 2000; Ingram, Hathorn, & Evans, 2000; Okuyama, 2005; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002). This paper reports both the benefits and problems of online chatting in a language class, summarizes reactions from students, and discusses the feasibility of online chatting as a classroom activity.

Review of literature

Online chatting is an anonymous, virtual activity conducted through the computer where, so long as they do not use a web-cam, users never have real face-to-face communication. In regard to the characteristics of online chatting, Roed (2003) reported the behaviors of language learners in a virtual environment as yielding a "… low level of inhibition and social anxiety, in particular, would be advantageous in foreign language learning" and "… would result in increased language production" (p. 155). Along a similar line, Okuyama (2005) and Wallance (1999) refer to the effects resulting from the absence of the students' own self-image and other visual cues which have a positive effect on the students' participation within the English class, especially for those who are shy in face-to-face communication. In summary, online chatting might facilitate the students to communicate in English as a result of lowered self-awareness while engaging in public discourse.

Questions for this project

In general, in order to examine our hypothesis that online chatting might facilitate the students to communicate in English as a result of lowered self-awareness, we would need several objective indicators within a rigidly controlled research design. However, this is not a formal research study, and therefore was beyond scope of our project. Rather, we have based our project on the following questions: "Does online chatting work in a language class? If yes (or no), why?" To answer these questions, we focused our project on several purposes as described in the next section.

Purpose

Our project had three purposes related to the Japanese student practicing English. The first purpose was to assess the viability of using the Internet and software, such as Yahoo Messenger, as a language practice tool for Japanese student. The secondary purpose was to gauge the student's reactions to using online Internet text chat. We felt that such feedback would help us to discover if there was sufficient interest in this type of communication to warrant future projects or activities. In addition, the third purpose was to assess whether there was any possibility of using Internet text chat within a classroom environment.

Participants
Students

The project participants were 10 students attending a Japanese technical university and ranged in age from 18 to 22. Although their English speaking level was low, all had some reading and writing ability in English. These students were recruited from our English classes and the school's English club. Once we began asking for volunteers, we quickly had more than we could accommodate. Although we were pleased by this level of interest from the student population, we decided to adhere to the original target number. From those who applied, we selected ten volunteer students who were familiar with using computers for sending email and had experience with cellular phone text messaging, but no experience with online chatting.

Teachers

Two English teachers engaged in this project. They were native speakers of English. However, a Japanese teacher of English helped when the students needed Japanese translations during the project. Each teacher was given the task of assigning Yahoo ID's and choosing chat partners. There was an attempt to pair students with native speakers who might have similar interests. The teacher was also to be available to assist students with any technical issues related to the hardware or software. Additionally, in an effort to make sure the conversations moved quickly and smoothly, the teachers were to monitor discussions and offer help when a student seemed to falter with comprehension or spelling. Teachers were to encourage participation, but guide conversations only when absolutely necessary.

As a project background strategy for each day, it was part of the teacher's role to introduce possible topics for conversation. The topics were drawn from Paul Gilbert's book *Go Ahead, Talk (*1994) and the ESL Conversation Questions website. Students were encouraged to select several questions from the materials that they could ask the native English speaker and also was of interest to them. For example, were they interested in knowing the person's hobbies, what they ate, what kind of work they performed, where they went to school, etc. The introduction of basic questions, expressions and vocabulary related to specific topics appeared to give the students confidence when talking to their native English speaking counterparts.

Procedure

In designing our project, we considered many factors, including the student's level of English ability, motivation, computer skills and more. For example, while many Japanese students have telephone text messaging experience, we found few had any experience with online Internet text chat. Online chatting has an advantage over cellular telephone text messaging in that it offers the students a chance to engage in *real-time* communication using a device, e.g. a computer, which some of the students were already familiar. However, given the lack of computer experience, we needed to select software that was easy to use. After considering several alternatives, we chose Yahoo Messenger as the Internet text chat platform because of its user-friendliness, it allows for private conversations between individuals and it is free. In addition, the conversation recording feature of the software would allow teachers to review the text conversations once they ended.

After deciding on the Yahoo Messenger software, the next step was to download and test the software in our school's computer lab. Although the computers in the school's lab had Japanese operating systems and the hardware included a Japanese keyboard, we elected to use the English version of Yahoo Messenger. While there are pros and cons to this approach, it was felt by using the English version that students would be more immersed into an English learning environment. We then practiced online Internet text chat between each other and with family and friends to gain proficiency with the software. Based on our past experience, we preinstalled the software on the computers intended for use in the project. This step was followed by a check

of the computer systems to determine that they operated correctly and the software settings were consistent on all the machines. These set-up procedures were an essential step in the preparation process to insure we were ready to deal with any problems related to the software or procedures. In addition, the set-up experience would allow us to gain a better understanding of what the students would be experiencing during the online text chat. We felt this would prepare us to offer technical advice if problems arose, although we would encourage the students to try and solve minor difficulties on their own.

This setup stage was followed by a search for native English speaking participants, primarily drawing on friends and family we knew from the United States. At the same time, we investigated the Japanese students' interest in the project. We invited students from our current classes, as well as the school's English Club to participate. When it was determined there were an adequate number of persons interested in the project, we completed the first stage of the project by developing an action plan and time schedule.

The first project session was used to introduce the students to the technology. Students were shown the workings of the computer and exposed to the software. This allowed us to identify students who needed help in using the software and also to identify any problems in the software setup. The second project session involved additional practice using the software to communicate between pairs of Japanese students. The teacher participated if necessary, but spent most of the time observing the interaction and attempting to fine tune the process. The third project session was used to introduce Japanese students to their native English speaking counterparts. The primary objective during this session was to make sure that communication could be established using the software and to perform basic introductions.

Following project sessions included a pre-discussion of that day's subject and an introduction of any new phrases and vocabulary that might be tried during the online text chat. This was then followed by online discussions with the native English speakers. The final project session was used to discuss with the students their reactions to the experience and gather suggestions for future improvements.

Instruments
Software

Free software for asynchronous online Internet communication (online text chat) was downloaded to insure it would operate with the restrictions placed on it by our school's Internet firewall. For this project, we used Yahoo Messenger software, but there were many other software packages available. Software such as MSN Messenger, ICQ, AOL Instant Messenger, Paltalk and others were considered, but the choice of Yahoo Messenger was based on our past use of the product, the recording feature and that it worked reasonably well with the school's Internet firewall.

Individual user accounts

A generic individual user account was set up and assigned to each student, and the same password was used for all user accounts. This procedure was followed to allow the teacher to use the same ID's over again for future groups of students by simply changing the passwords. This also speeded up the

setup and student training process. This same ID process was also completed for the native English speakers. In this way, the native English speaking volunteers were not required to spend time creating accounts and only needed to have the Yahoo Messenger software installed on their computers. To complete the process for the remote users, they were sent the Yahoo Messenger ID and password along with the recommended software settings. Through this process, we were able to compile a list of Yahoo ID's and could reuse these by simply altering the password for each account, thereby eliminating the lengthy process of creating new accounts for future projects.

Contact lists and software preferences

In the Yahoo Messenger software, contact lists were set up between the assigned accounts. This permitted each user to text chat only with others on their list. Also, software preferences were set so persons not on the student's contact list could not interrupt the text chat session. This insured privacy and security for the participants by eliminating possible intrusion from persons outside the system, i.e. anyone not affiliated with the project.

Results
Things that worked

Students were enthusiastic about the Internet text chat and overall patient when faced with technical issues such as slow Internet connections, glitches in the software and minor hardware problems. We also found most of the students thought the Yahoo Messenger software was easy to use and pre-selecting discussion topics seemed to be effective in preventing communication blocks. The topics for conversation, combined with a list of vocabulary words and phrases, selected and discussed before starting the Internet text chat session, seemed to reassure the students. Most said they felt better prepared for the conversation and more relaxed.

Teacher assigned ID's eliminated problems associated with letting the students create their own Yahoo IDs. In an earlier experiment, students were asked to go through the entire process of ID creation and setting up the Yahoo software. When the students were faced with needing to decide on a personal ID, they became so involved in the attempt to find a clever name that the process virtually ground to a halt. By shifting this responsibility from the student to the teacher, this difficulty was avoided. In addition, students and teachers avoided the need to memorize several ID specific passwords by using a single shared password. This simplified the startup of each session and reduced the amount of time it took before the students could begin engaging in text chat. Also, the use of a single password allowed the teacher to later enter the software and quickly examine the conversation logs.

Problems

Though the project was successful in improving student motivation, we discovered there were issues in several areas that needed more study and possible refinement. For example, in the student-to-student Internet text chats, which were a part of the first two sessions, we found using more than two students per text chat group caused confusion and

limited interaction. Students were generally unable to follow complex conversations in this type of setting. In text chat sessions with more than two persons, questions, responses to the questions and comments often appear out of sync and it takes additional skills to keep track of the separate conversations. When the text chat sessions were limited to conversations involving only two persons, the level of participation, though slow at times, was more consistent. For this reason, each Japanese student was limited to text chatting with only one other person during any one session.

Computer glitches associated with the school's Internet firewall stalled progress with the sessions several times, which was frustrating for the students and the teachers. In hindsight, we should have spent more time discussing the use of the software with the University's computer network personnel to reduce problems in this area.

In addition, finding native speakers to participate was difficult due to time zone problems. The native English speakers we found to participate in the U.S. were 13 to 15 hours behind Japan time. Since it was not possible for us to move the Internet text chat times to the extremes, the persons in the U.S. were kind enough to accommodate us by staying up late into the evening. However, this is a significant barrier to using chat with native English speakers from outside Japan. It is unlikely that any significant number of native English speakers would be willing to participate, except in some very limited way, if they must bear most of the burden in terms of inconvenience.

Reactions from students

The following student reactions are but a summary of several short roundtable discussions involving the students and from notes and observations by the teachers. The Yahoo Messenger logs were examined, but mainly to insure that recording the text chats was possible. In addition, because of the school policy that protects the student's personal information, the actual content of the logs cannot be disclosed within this paper. Positive student reactions included the following:

1. Overall, most students were enthusiastic about using their English skills in online Internet text chat.

2. All the students appeared to be excited about the idea of real time conversation with native speakers of English.

3. Students appeared eager to talk about everyday life issue with native English speakers, especially if their counterpart was near their own age.

However, there were some negative student reactions.

1. Students were often frustrated with their own limited English ability.

2. Students were mildly annoyed by technical delays or confusion regarding the effective use the software.

3. Students were easily confused when too many people participated in a conversation or there were outside distractions.

4. Students had limited interest in chatting with fellow students.

Limitations

First, it should be noted that although there was a level of planning, which was felt adequate to yield some worthwhile data, this was not a controlled research project. Rather, it should be considered as only a preliminary exercise from which a more scientific future project might be undertaken. Second, online chatting might be well suited to providing the authentic language for real communication. However, due to limitations relating to class sizes and available educational facilities, it was resolved to conduct the project as an extra-curricular activity. Furthermore, we needed control over a number of variables, such as the English ability of the participants, their computer skill level as well as having a more structured physical environment than would be found in a large classroom.

Discussion

Does online chatting work in a language class?

For the participating students, the idea of using the Internet and online chatting for English practice proved to be very attractive. They found the idea of real-time communication with real-people to be very exciting and this appeared to motivate them to apply their English language skills. However, this seems only to apply when the student thinks they are communicating with a native English speaker of approximately their own age. Their interest was very low when chatting with fellow students and also with native English speakers who were much older. Therefore, while the project did act as a motivator for students, it appears this is directly linked to the interaction with native English speaking participants and not simply the use of the technology. This also might be related to the effect of "a shield from being on-stage (Bradley & Lomicka, 2000)". According to Bradley and Lomicka (2000), when communicating through the Internet, users are said to demonstrate fewer inhibitions, less social anxiety and more reduced self-awareness because the computer works as an emotional or affective "shield." Given this, it appears unlikely that online chatting has much potential for any type of pair work between Japanese students.

Conclusion

In addition to the lack of pair work potential, other issues were found to pose difficulties. For example, problems associated with computer software and hardware technical issues, teacher setup time, finding native English speaking counterparts and time zone differences make it unlikely the technology can be used successfully within the general classroom. However, despite the limitations and difficulties mentioned, there does appear to be a potential for applying the technology outside of the classroom. Especially in regard to Japanese students having higher levels of English ability, it may be that introducing them to this technology could motivate them to practice English on their own. It appeared clear from our observations that the Japanese students were very motivated to talk to native English speakers and quite willing to learn and use a new technology to accomplish this. Therefore, if the technology is viewed in this manner, its real value may be as a linking mechanism by which Japanese students can actually communicate with a native English speaker. Given the difficulties and lack of potential for

classroom use, future projects will concentrate on teaching Japanese students to use the technology and seek out their own native English-speaking counterparts.

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